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Redeeming lives: Second Chance Coffee Co. provides solution to recidivism

In 2005, before the vision for I Have A Bean was even formed in his head, Peter Leonard went to Brazil.

He went as part of a church mission with a few others from his parish, and on one excursion he saw a man roasting coffee beans. He watched the man carefully, in awe because he'd never seen it done before. Slowly, he'd turn the beans, watching as the colors changed from spongy green to a familiar brown. Leonard asked him for a few bags — 10 kilos to be precise — to take back to the U.S. to distribute to those who donated to the church so that he and a few others could make that trip. He drank eight of those kilos within the first few weeks of coming back.

The idea formed immediately after his last sip: if that guy in Brazil could do it, Leonard said, why can't I? He turned his grill into a roaster, experimented with beans — regularly using his neighbors as test dummies — and the rest of his plan was formed. In 2007, the mission and vision of Second Chance Coffee Company, and its label I Have A Bean came to complete fruition.

If felons need jobs, Leonard said, why should they be disqualified from getting them?

Business as mission

The mission of Second Chance Coffee Company and its brand I Have A Bean is to accomplish two things — roast and distribute coffee, and give post-prison people the chance to start over, helping them transform their lives as they roast coffee and begin contributing to society again.

As an entrepreneur with a tech background, Leonard knew that there were some odds against him, but with the rise of people wanting to support smaller businesses, I Have A Bean has been able to stay a float. Three in 10 jobs, according to Pew Research Center, are now held by

self-employed people and those they employ. This takes on a different meaning for Leonard and his company, however.

The mission of I Have A Bean and the larger company aims to curb recidivism as one justification for its goals. The roasting plant at the company's headquarters in Wheaton is entirely staffed by felons, except one.

More national companies, ones that are much bigger than Leonard's 16-person crew, are accepting felons. Many are in the restaurant or retail field — such as Chipotle, Men's Warehouse — but there are a few notable companies, such as Tesla, whose names grace the list. Though these companies are willing to hire felons, that doesn't necessarily mean that a felon will get hired over another qualified applicant. At I Have A Bean, the felon is preferred often more so than another applicant.

The mission and preference stems from a personal experience for Leonard, as well as one of faith. He saw how hard it was for a relative of his, once he was released, to find employment. That experience shaped the mission of I Have A Bean in a way that could benefit him as well as other felons in similar predicaments.

“I watched what happened to his life through that process and in spite of his vast intellect and really special technical skills, because he had a felony no one would employ him. They didn't care what kind of felony, it didn't make any difference,” Leonard said. “It wasn't until I saw that happen that I cared about felons, because until then I didn't know any. My attitude was like what a lot of people's still is, which is along the lines of ‘well you should have thought about that before you did it.’”

When he got the company up and running, Leonard's first employee was his relative. His Christian faith also led him to believe in the mission.

“It's part of what I think I'm called to do,” he said. “It's part of the scriptural mandate of The Bible says love your neighbor as yourself. It's not about mushy feelings or sympathy or empathy, it's about action. So our action is to treat anybody the way we want to be treated. Do I want a job? Yes, I do. Felons aren't afforded that by most of society, but in my experience most aren't bad people.”

Leonard and his team work with people once they get out of prison to help post-prison people get resettled and make sure they don't go back to the lives that they used to lead. They weed out those who aren't interested in improving because "no amount of help (we) can give them will help."

Jennifer Vollen-Katz, executive director of the John Howard Association, which provides citizen oversight of Illinois' adult and juvenile correctional facilities, said that caring about the rights of post-prison people, as well as the rights of incarcerated people, is an integral part in lowering recidivism and ensuring the productivity of post-prison peoples.

"We should care (about prisoner rights) because people go in, but they come out, and we should care about how they get treated," Vollen-Katz, said. "They are still part of society and part of communities and we should consider their treatment."

Considering the treatment of post-prison people, as well as those still in prisons could be a key to lowering recidivism rates in Illinois and nationally. Leonard kept the treatment of his employees in mind when hiring, going back to the assertion he made at the start of the company, that felons — like all other people — are deserving of jobs and success on par with that of those who have never been convicted.

That assertion didn't stop others from continuing to feel that felons, and even the felons themselves, were bad people or that the system was against them. When other employees came in for interviews, Leonard said, they did so slowly. He described many as trepidatious — they would come in and expect a completely different interview experience.

Many, Leonard recounted, would leave in tears knowing that there was a place for them in the post-prison world.

Since Second Chance Coffee Company operates as a "business as mission" meaning that all of the money they make goes back to reinforcing the mission — coffee sales and deals with other companies or restaurants allow Leonard to employ more people, build new roasters and experiment with new ideas all under the mission of changing lives.

Leonard has worked with people all along the continuum of being released, from newly released, to out of prison a number of years. "We have a support attitude with all of our employees because we understand the struggle that comes with being released," Leonard said.

“It’s very difficult for felons to find places to live so many go back on the streets. At I Have a Bean, we’re non-judgmental. We don’t care what you did so long as you want to make your life better.”

A revolving door

Recidivism, as Leonard and his company point out, affects nearly 12,000 Illinois residents annually. Of a possible 20,000 prisoners released, 12,000 will find themselves back in the confines of a penitentiary or back to drugs.

As of February 2015, the recidivism rate in Illinois is 48 percent for adult inmates, and 53.5 percent for juveniles who return within three years, according to an executive order issued by the office of the Illinois Secretary of State.

Last year, in July, former Governor Quinn signed a bill that ensured fair hiring practices across Illinois. Criminal background checks, according to the law, would not be needed until the applicant was considered qualified for the job. The “ban the box” movement, nationally, is also seeing a surge now that President Obama has opted out of having federal applicants indicate whether or not they’re felons, but that doesn’t necessarily indicate that things are good for felons. Jobs, and the stability they bring, are still a barrier some are trying to break through.

“We [JHA] has an enormous responsibility to help people re-enter society. We help them acquire job skills, counseling, and help them leave communities or be successful in those communities they weren’t successful in before,” Vollen-Katz said. “There’s nothing like a conviction to make it harder for you to get a job.”

William Sampson, chair of the public policy department at DePaul, attributes jobs to making it out of neighborhoods and poor conditions.

“Many are trapped in food and job deserts,” Sampson said of why someone might not be able to leave their community. “[Jobs] are at the center of a higher quality of life.”

Though jobs for post-prison people are important, education and community restructuring are just as vital. Rehabilitation in prison can be useful, Vollen-Katz said, so long as prisoners leave with skills they can use in the workforce or with skills that help them resettle into life outside of prison.

The return to crime is one that can also be attributed to the “tough on crime” nature of society; in the ’90s, when Washington state and California passed their three-strikes law, habitual offenders were locked up and their sentences elongated to correspond with the how many times the person was previously convicted, not necessarily the offense itself.

The most recent recidivism study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducted in 2005 found that of the 400,000 prisoners documented, around 67 percent were arrested in three years and around 77 percent were re-arrested in five. Illinois was not part of this study.

Better rehabilitation programs could address that. Vollen-Katz said that programs focused on the needs of the individual are most important. This way, prisoners get the skills they need during their sentence. By “analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the programs” prisons or the states in charge could begin to differentiate them per the prison population, but still based on the individual and their overall needs.

Bernadette Rabuy, of the Prison Policy Initiative, works with others to create better lives for prisoners and post-prison people. Rabuy supports the idea of rehabilitation and using prison as a means of helping prisoners acquire skills they may not have been able to achieve otherwise. The “overly punitive” period during the ’90s should be redressed, she said, and letting people out or helping them get college educations while in prison, as well as helping families get to prisons for visitation could be the best longterm solutions that benefit everyone, not just prisoners.

“We spend a lot of money on the criminal justice system, but we should focus on education and on curbing substance abuse. We would be able to keep families together, making them stronger,” Rabuy said. “Stronger families equals stronger communities.”

Fresh brew and a fresh start

At Latinicity, a new home for I Have A Bean and for Leonard’s vision, employees set up for a busy Friday lunch hour. Baristas cleaned espresso makers, frothed milk and talked casually among themselves, barely heard over conversations of crowds walking past or eating Mexican-inspired food.

Currently, none of those working in Latinicity are felons. Given the short turn around period for Leonard and his team to join Latinicity, he wasn’t able to train people to the level of expertise he wanted. Though this was a let down, he was able to double his staff from eight to 16

— eight at the Wheaton headquarters and eight at Latinicity — and donate to non-profits who specialize in counseling or other services to help the people Second Chance employs with some of the money made from the deal to make the transition, and life for the post-prisoners he's come to know and employ, easier.

“There's a lot of things people don't understand about (felons).,” Leonard said. “People think, in my opinion, that once somebody gets out of prison they should be able to hope right back into society and get a job and pay their bills and be like anybody else who has grown up understanding how society works, but for many people getting out of prison it's like getting off a spaceship on Mars.”

The coffee company has partnered with churches to make sure that recently release employees get all of the help they need to be successful, too, to help the rehabilitation effort. Leonard said that, since they are a small company, he makes it a point to never say no. If someone wants to meet or wants to partner with I Have A Bean, he is willing to take the time to do so. He also networks and maintains connections, which is partially the reason behind the three espresso bars in Latinicity now serving lattes made from I Have A Bean products.

Donations, as well as partnerships and the three new espresso bars in Latinicity and Block 37 on State Street, also help Leonard and crew continuing roasting and making drinks for coffee drinkers. Though the partnership with Latinicity is new, the mission and the business will continue doing what it has since it began: helping and nurturing those who want to make substantial changes in their lives.

“One of my thoughts before starting this was that felons had no skills at all. My thinking now is completely different,” Leonard said. “They have all kinds of skills and it may not be in coffee roasting but we've employed people with all kinds of skills. Our job is to help them flourish with the talents they've been given. That can't always happen at I Have A Bean, but we can be a stepping stone to another employer.”

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Infographics:

<https://infograph.venngage.com/p/58712/rachelh-business-reporting-final-incarceration-rates-total-incarcerated-population>

<https://infograph.venngage.com/p/58716/incarceration-and-recidivism-rachel-hinton-business-reporting-final>